Cambridge Growth Policy Workshops
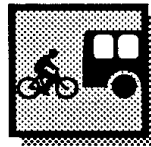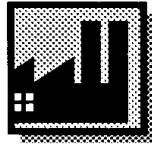
Cambridge
Community Development
Department

February 24, 1992

4 . Growth Policy Workshops

Between February and September 1992, the Planning Board conducted a series of five, three hour workshops to elicit a wide range of public opinion about the many planning issues of concern for Cambridge today and in the future. Forty individuals from across the city, representing the neighborhoods, the institutions and the business community, participated actively in these discussions. Each of the first three workshops included a discussion of two planning topics. Issues, proposed policies and supporting materials were given to the participants in advance to assist them in preparing for the discussions. At the request of the participants, two additional workshops were held to allow further exploration of the issues and proposed policies.

What follows is a synopsis of the workshop topics and comments. The Planning Board has reviewed all of the comments from these sessions and used them to help shape a vision for the future of Cambridge and policies to assist the City in achieving that vision.

The Community Development Department prepared workshop materials that were distributed to participants. A series of policy questions covered a wide range of issues, and relevant data was appended.

Transportation

In all of the major planning decisions of the last decade, transportation,
and particularly automobile traffic, has been a central concern and has produced much debate.
Growth policy discussions considered city-sponsored means to change the mode of travel {single
occupancy vehicles vs. other means, including bicycling or walking), movement into and out of the
city and within its boundaries, protection of neighborhoods from car and truck traffic and regional
efforts to improve air quality.

Summary of Comments

Discussions grappled with how to protect the quality of neighborhood life from traffic
impacts while enabling needed levels of economic growth. A recurring theme was the
regional nature of the issue and the means of responding to it, particularly in light of the
development of a new/amended State Implementation Plan {SIP) to respond to federal
Clean Air Act mandates. Other factors outside the city's direct control include agencies
such as the MBTA and the high percentage of non residents commuting to work in Cambridge.
Differences arose over whether to emphasize requirements, such as in restricting car use and
parking spaces, or incentives to reward desired transit behavior.

There was broad support for City investment in transportation alternatives such as jitneys,
vanpooling and shuttles; bicycling; and land use policies which encourage non auto mobility and
concentration of mixed used development close to transit stations. Mandatory regulations of car
travel should be executed only as part of a regional effort, with the City taking the lead in State
moves to craft a regional policy. Support was also voiced for public- private cooperation in
developing Transportation Management Organizations to promote alternative transit programs such
as

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carpooling and employee education. Some participants stressed use of incentives or "carrots" to lessen the burden on business; others were concerned that "resident only" hiring initiatives were overly narrow. Regarding neighborhood traffic impacts, comments supported existing policies concerning one way streets, roadway improvements and other means to divert cars and trucks. Given the City's limited authority, a regional goods movement plan is needed to route trucks around rather than through neighborhoods.

Housing

The creation, preservation, quality, and affordability of the city's housing stock are vital elements of the city's fabric and contribute greatly to the city's social and physical diversity. Yet responding to diverse housing needs while preserving the physical character of existing neighborhoods poses significant challenges. Resources for producing new housing are scarce, due to federal and state cutbacks and the shortage of vacant land outside of former industrial areas. Discussants considered whether the latter could accommodate residential uses; also discussed were how to balance existing densities with incentives to create affordable housing, populations to target for housing, and preservation of the existing stock.

Summary of Comments

Participants lauded the retention of existing residential character and density, except in cases where existing character is less desirable. Examples include neighborhoods closely bordering industrial areas, or excessively dense high-rise housing.

While most agreed that more housing was needed for families with children, particularly those with lower-incomes, a few concerns were raised about the proper proportion of housing which should be "affordable." Others wondered whether future demand warranted considerable new housing development. Mandating affordable housing in new developments was generally opposed, while participants supported the use of incentives to develop new affordable housing, and favored maintenance of affordability in the existing stock through reconstruction. Racial minorities, especially newcomers to the city, should be targeted for assistance, as well as persons with special needs. Rehabilitation assistance should receive a high priority and be concentrated in the city's lower-income neighborhoods. Rent control, which was not touched on directly by proposed growth policies, sparked some debate about its accessibility to lower-income residents, the causes of the physical deterioration of rent control buildings, and the amount of affordable housing in Cambridge.

Most favored the inclusion of housing as a component of development in the evolving industrial areas, where appropriate, though concern was voiced about effects of pollution and the compatibility of industry and housing. Some business representatives feared that new residents in these areas would spark conflict with their industrial neighbors. Well designed buffers and transitional zones were strongly recommended.

Economic Development and Employment

Economic activities are both the object of development policies, such as transportation and land use, and the vehicle for achieving them. Much future activity will likely occur in the city's evolving industrial districts, encompassing ten percent of the city's land area. These areas are a unique asset, and also suggest the multiple and sometimes conflicting objectives sought by growth policy. Workshop discussions highlighted the need for detailed, long-term planning to respond to desired goals, both in the older districts and in other non residential areas, such as the commercial squares and districts. Participants commented on development areas, retail districts, employment and business incentives, illuminating many of the key themes of growth policy: finding the appropriate scale and mix of uses, compatibility of commerce with other activities, preserving neighborhood character while ensuring economic vitality, and balancing regulations with incentives for business.

Summary of Comments

Participants gave qualified support for a mixed-use planning approach in the development areas. The need for a vibrant tax and employment base, along with ample space and flexibility of use to nurture new industries, was widely acknowledged. Participants heard testimony and volunteered many comments on the importance of the older industrial districts as a critical resource, both for tax revenue to support City services and as a source of new employment, particularly in emerging, environmentally sound, technology-based industries.

Other commentators felt that economic goals need to be balanced with other concerns such as preserving the existing scale of neighborhoods, minimizing traffic impacts and ensuring a smooth transition between commercial and residential uses, through zoning and urban design. Such concerns extended to other non residential areas. In all cases commentators emphasized the importance of addressing unintended consequences of economic development, such as traffic, and the need to tailor development strategies for specific circumstances.

Participants widely agreed that large new competing retail districts should not be encouraged. Ground floor retail in new office development was supported strongly. Neighborhood retailers deserve support, even if facing economic obsolescence, because they reduce traffic and provide opportunities for jobs and entrepreneurship. It was noted that many retailers need regional as well as local customers to succeed. The paradox is that such success breeds its own problems, such as increased traffic and change to the character of an area.

The means for choosing development policies elicited many comments. Long-term urban design plans providing a consistent and predictable environment for private developments received support. Some comments stressed the need for consistency between various policies, and for fairness in applying them to diverse private actors. Others debated the merits of business incentives versus regulation to achieve desired goals. All acknowledged that some level of regulation is inevitable in a complex city, but the need to understand the consequences -pro and con -of public policy on business was accented. Fundamental questions about how the City decides between housing and commercial development arose, particularly in light of conflicts when the two are mixed, and the high costs of infrastructure when uses are changed (as in East Cambridge, where housing has grown up in once industrial tracts.) The high costs of environmental clean-up for housing development was also noted. Some felt that the City needs to choose a specific direction for particular areas.

The social context for development was a topic of concern. Employment and training policies were supported, especially those targeted to women and minorities, to ensure that all benefit equally from the fruits of recent development and emerging industries. The impact of economic shifts on the city's cultural diversity, and the need to preserve and strengthen the latter, were also stressed.
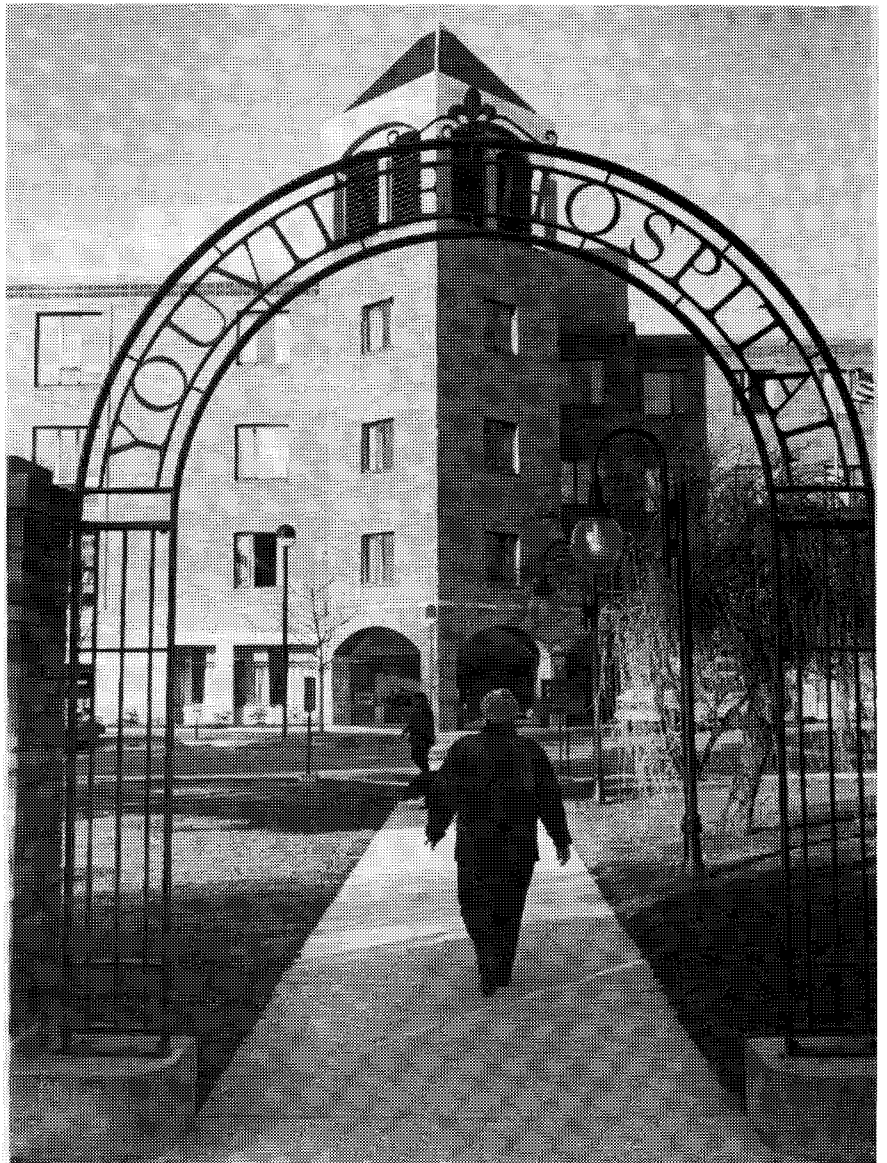
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nstitutions

The city's institutions, particularly in higher education and health care, are a perennial source of strength and friction for Cambridge. Competing demands for scarce land, the tax-exempt status of institutions, and the concern over the city's character fuel continuing concerns. The challenge for growth policy is to address these issues while allowing institutions to remain competitive and adapt to demographic, economic and technological change. Participants discussed trade-offs between preserving taxable land and supporting technological advances spurred by university research. Areas discussed include community interaction, physical expansion, housing, preservation of the city's tax base, commercial investment, and smaller institutions.

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Summary of Comments

There is strong public support for a formal, ongoing dialogue between the City and its institutions about land use, future plans and community needs for housing, job training and education. The institutions also need to carry on internal planning to determine their future needs and visions, particularly in light of development. While some called on the universities to maintain a formal liaison with public schools, it was observed that past attempts resulted in controversy.

Comments focused mainly on the universities, with some recognition of the hospitals as major institutions. The prevailing sentiment at workshops was to restrict universities to locations historically occupied by such uses, through the institutional overlay districts and the Residence C-3 zoning designation. University expansion into residential neighborhoods was generally opposed, though City controls over institutions' internal functions received little support. Expansion into abutting commercial areas, or in other nonresidential areas was not strictly opposed. Growth in the latter case was deemed acceptable if tax accords with the City were secured, retail and related services were a part of institutional development, and if institutional uses and ownership did not overwhelm commercial and industrial districts.

Most want to see educational institutions provide housing for their student, faculty and staff communities, where possible on land already owned by institutions. When it is built in abutting neighborhoods, it should match the scale, density and character there. While some residents suggested satellite campuses outside the city, educational representatives felt this would clash with their mission of maintaining a collegial atmosphere. The position was expressed that the institutions should not expand at all, unless a clear benefit to the city can be demonstrated.

Urban Design and Environment/Open Space

Sustainable development is fundamentally about the quality of the urban environment. That quality is greatly affected by a host of design issues ranging from broad concepts which help define the character of a particular area to specific details which will make that character come alive. Design plans and guidelines have been developed for many parts of Cambridge; to ensure a high quality environment, other areas will need to be addressed as well.

Open spaces such as parks and recreational areas are essential to good urban design. They reinforce and add their own dimension to the quality of life in a dense urban community. Workshop participants considered the content of urban design standards {height, setback, use, density, etc.), the scope of their application to different areas, and the appropriate process of design review. Standards for historic preservation in specific districts were weighed against the use of zoning mechanisms. Also discussed were the creation and maintenance of open space, as well as possible trade-offs with other uses. There was support for the idea of sustainable design, in terms of building in harmony with nature and with the cultural and historic character of Cambridge.

Summary of Comments

Participants agreed that height, setback, use, site development and density standards should reflect the City's fundamental urban design and environmental goals. Some felt that certain zoning provisions threaten neighborhood character, others supported lower base zoning levels, with bonuses reflecting open space and transportation goals. A citywide height limit was supported. Creation of design standards for new areas of development was favored, but it was noted that the city's image changes from section to section, and that plans should reflect that variety. Emphasis should be on designing for the public experience, as in streets and open spaces. The concept of "sustainable" or environmentally appropriate development was supported, so as not to shift environmental costs to future generations.

Comments about design review were mixed. The timing, scope and location of such reviews raised concerns, as did the fairness of their application. Success stories, such as University Park, were cited, while others cautioned that design review can engender tameness or staleness. Participants agreed that design review is needed in areas where small scale changes could disrupt the established character of a district.

Commentators favored open space and recreation facilities supporting a wide range of functions and clienteles, including the elderly and special needs populations. Some cited problems of access with existing sites, due to a lack of transportation or to programming constraints. They also agreed that open space provision should be a required component of new commercial and residential developments. Participants also believed that existing open space should not be replaced with other uses, except under extraordinary circumstances.

Participants supported the incorporation of maintenance plans into open space planning, particularly through public-private partnerships, such as agreements made for the renovation and maintenance of Winthrop Park. Also noted was the importance of linking open spaces through an "Olmstedian" vision, strengthening pedestrian environments and recognizing the utility of private open space. Some felt that public access to private open space should be encouraged.